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Human resources management

Joint Inspection Unit

Management of sick leave in the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "The management of sick leave in the United Nations system" (JIU/REP/2012/2).

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Summary

The report of the Joint Inspection Unit, entitled "The management of sick leave in the United Nations system", reviews the manner in which international organizations record, manage and report sick leave, with a view to proposing improvements that will enable the organizations of the United Nations system to clarify, improve and harmonize system-wide the rules and regulations pertaining to sick leave, prevent abuse, and more importantly, fulfil their duty of care with regard to the health and safety of staff.

The present note reflects the views of the organizations of the United Nations system on the recommendations provided in the report. The views of the system have been consolidated on the basis of input provided by the member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which welcomed the report and supported some of its conclusions.

I. Introduction

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit, entitled "The management of sick leave in the United Nations system", reviews the manner in which international organizations record, manage and report sick leave, with a view to proposing improvements that will enable the organizations of the United Nations system to clarify, improve and harmonize system-wide the rules and regulations pertaining to sick leave, prevent abuse and, more importantly, fulfil their duty of care with regard to the health and safety of staff.

2. The review revealed that the majority of the United Nations system organizations do not collect statistics on sick leave and even among those that do, the data is not comparable owing to different methodologies used, and indirect costs are not considered in their calculations. Furthermore, agencies do not record sick leave data for all staff, including temporary staff, consultants and independent contractors. Therefore, the Joint Inspection Unit was not able to state with certainty the cost of sick leave for the organizations of the United Nations system.

3. The Joint Inspection Unit recommends that newly created occupational health services should be required to focus on medical aspects of sick leave management, including the compilation of relevant statistics and analysis. It also recommends that managers and supervisors be provided with training in the ways to address the needs of staff members who have medical issues that may lead to significant absences. As such, the Unit recommends that executive heads design and implement a return-to-work policy for those staff on extended sick leave absences.

II. General comments

4. The organizations of the United Nations system welcome the report. They find it to be informative and useful, and support its findings and recommendations, many of which are already embedded in the current practice of some organizations. The organizations also note that in the conclusions of the report, the Joint Inspection Unit recognizes that many organizations are looking for ways to increase the use of flexible working arrangements that will benefit staff, in particular women, by allowing them to address work-life balance issues.

5. The organizations note, however, the need for further clarification in some areas of the report, such as in paragraph 44, where agencies see no need to have yet another medical services official employed in medium or small-scale organizations to monitor, review or approve sick leave from a purely administrative viewpoint. In such organizations and in the rare cases where suspected abuse of sick leave requires investigation, independent medical expertise can be sought from the medical services of another organization of the United Nations system, or from the private sector.

6. The organizations emphasize that while the report and its recommendations are indeed comprehensive, one area where the analysis of the Joint Inspection Unit and its recommendations would have been appreciated is the question of reducing absenteeism. While the Unit's inspectors have covered flexible working arrangements and health and productivity management as general topics, specific recommendations on absenteeism issues would have been useful. Moreover, some agencies commented on factual errors in the report. In one example, the Office of

Internal Oversight Services called attention to paragraph 45, in which it is stated erroneously that the audit recommendations of the Office regarding Medical Services and sick leave had not been implemented.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

Executive heads of United Nations system organizations should require their staff members to ensure that copies of all sick leave certificates and reports (where applicable) are submitted to their respective medical/occupational health services.

7. While the organizations generally support this recommendation, some note that operational requirements may have to be taken into account to achieve full implementation. In particular, several agencies note that country offices present challenges that may inhibit the full implementation of the recommendation. Others note the need to take into account specific agency guidelines for cut-off periods for consecutive or cumulative days per year that have been established for periods of extended sick leave and are intended to avoid excessive administrative processes in connection with sick leave.

Recommendation 2

The United Nations Medical Directors Working Group should establish a set of common information requirements to be included in sick leave certificates and reports.

8. The organizations of the United Nations support and welcome this recommendation. They note, however, that the feasibility of standardizing such information requirements throughout the United Nations system will depend on relevant national legislation at each duty station.

Recommendation 3

Executive heads of United Nations system organizations should ensure that sick leave certificates and reports for staff contain the information requirements agreed by the United Nations Medical Directors Working Group.

9. The organizations of the United Nations support and welcome this recommendation.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should, in consultation with their respective human resources department and medical/occupational health services, design and implement an absence management module, in particular absence due to sick leave, for staff with supervisory or managerial responsibilities.

10. While the organizations welcome the spirit of this recommendation, they note the need to first establish, in the appropriate guidelines and regulations, the rights

and responsibilities of all parties (staff, management and Medical Services) involved in the process of managing sick leave.

Recommendation 5

The legislative bodies of United Nations system organizations should require executive heads to provide them with comprehensive annual or biennial reports on sick leave, including statistical and cost data, and measures taken by the organization to reduce sick leave absenteeism.

11. While the organizations note that this recommendation is directed to legislative bodies, they consider that its implementation is contingent on the implementation of recommendation 4, which calls for a system to manage sick leave, and recommendation 6, in relation to the methodology to calculate the financial burden of disease/illness to be developed by the High-Level Committee on Management of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination. While the organizations support the need to track statistical and cost data and to implement necessary mitigating measures, they question the role of the legislative bodies in this matter and suggest that the recommendation should be addressed to executive heads, as they are vested with the responsibility and accountability for ensuring the normal functioning of their organizations, including the well-being and health of their staff.

Recommendation 6

The High-Level Committee on Management of the Chief Executives Board should, through its finance and budget and human resources networks, develop a methodology to calculate the burden of disease/illness within the organizations.

12. The organizations of the United Nations support and welcome this recommendation.

Recommendation 7

Executive heads of United Nations system organizations should, in consultation with their respective human resources department and medical/occupational health services, design and implement a return-to-work policy for their staff members.

13. The organizations of the United Nations system support and welcome this recommendation. They note that the role of bringing employees with medical conditions back to work is a primary objective of every occupational health service and support the design and implementation of a return-to-work policy.